

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find an analysis of the importance of fathers to child development.

## Where have all the fathers gone?

By Kate Fraher, Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

On August 1, 2007, a British government health committee recommended the British parliament vote on a newly drafted bill, which removes a clause requiring that fertility clinics consider whether a child has a father as part of pre-treatment consultations. [1] A clause in Britain's current assisted human reproduction legislation maintains fertility clinics *should* indeed consider a child's need for a father, but it has been under fire in recent years. Back in 2004, the head of Britain's fertility watchdog called the clause "nonsense." [2] The clause could now be axed; in effect, the draft bill before the British government would make fathers optional for babies born via fertility treatment in Britain. [3] While health officials in Britain work on cutting fathers out, a recent editorial in Canada's *Globe and Mail* suggests bringing dads back in. Bemoaning the lack of fathers and discussing their importance in the wake of another young victim of gun violence in Toronto, the authors write, "Where are the fathers? Where are the programs to encourage responsible fatherhood? Talk about fathers is as absent as the fathers themselves." [4] And they are correct to worry: The evidence suggests that fathers have a unique role to play in child development.

There are many theories as to how mothers and fathers parent differently and how the sum of their net differences is beneficial to child development. So in an age where motherhood without fatherhood is an increasingly available option for women using in-vitro fertilization and sperm donation, it's important to consider what is lost by removing fathers from the family. Some experts say fathers' parenting styles may make a unique contribution to their child's development. [5] If this is true, how do mothers and fathers differ in their parenting styles? And how are these differences beneficial to child development?

For one, mothers and fathers use different communication styles. From infancy, mothers are more likely to speak to their children using soft, soothing tones, whereas fathers are more likely to

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communicate using sharp bursts of sound. [6] Fathers are more likely to use unfamiliar words with their children and to request clarification when they do not understand what their child is saying, challenging children to reformulate their thoughts in order to be understood. Fathers are more likely to give direct commands related to problem-solving, compared to mothers who are more likely to take children's problems into their own hands. [7]

Studies have also shown differences in the way mothers and fathers bond with their children. According to proponents of attachment theory, the strength of the bond between parent and child determines the degree to which a child is open to exploring the world around him. [8] Children who are securely attached to their parents are more confident, self-reliant, resilient, resourceful, empathetic, cooperative and popular among their peers. [9] According to some experts, mother-child attachment is forged mainly through caregiving-related activities. For fathers, experts suggest this relationship is forged mainly through physical play. [10] Numerous studies have shown that fathers engage in more rough-and-tumble play compared to mothers. [11] Dr. Daniel Paquette, a professor of psychology at the University of Montreal suggests that the high intensity of physical play with fathers might explain why children are able to develop strong bonds with their fathers even though they may spend less time with them compared to their mothers. [12] Father-child play, especially rough-and-tumble play tends to be more unpredictable, more intense, and more physically stimulating than play with mothers. [13] Besides facilitating secure attachment with children, father-child interaction has been shown to increase children's cognitive abilities and increase children's capacity for empathy. [14]

Paquette proposes that the dynamics of the father-child relationship encourage risk-taking, obedience and the formation of competition skills mainly through physical play. He calls this relationship the "father-child activation relationship" and notes its "contrast to the mother-child attachment relationship aimed at calming and comforting children in times of stress." [15] In his explanation of the father-child activation relationship, Paquette says, "Men seem to have a tendency to surprise children, to destabilize them momentarily, and to encourage them to take risks, thus enabling children to learn to be brave in unfamiliar situations and to stand up for themselves. Children need stimulation and motivation as much as they need to be calmed and secured, and they receive such stimulation primarily from men, primarily through physical play." [16]

In 1975, social scholar Michael E. Lamb described fathers as the 'forgotten contributors to child development' [17] and the statement holds true today. Children who grow up without a father are at a disadvantage. This should logically then become a part of the counselling procedures fertility clinics provide. The experts



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agree that the specific benefits of father-child interaction need further investigation. Until then, the existing evidence should be used to create and help maintain a family structure that operates in the best interests of children.

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- [2] Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990, November 1) Retrieved August 1, 2007 from [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1990/ukpga\\_19900037\\_en\\_2.htm#mdiv28](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1990/ukpga_19900037_en_2.htm#mdiv28)
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- [4] The Globe & Mail (2007, July 31) The absence of fathers. Retrieved August 1, 2007 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>
- [5] For a review of the literature on fathers' influences on child development see Lewis, C. & Lamb, M.E. (2003). Fathers' influences on children's development: The evidence from two-parent families. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 18(2): 211-228.
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- [13] Ricaud-Droisy & Zaouche-Gaudron, 160.
- [14] Child Trends. (1999, May). Research Brief: What do fathers contribute to children's well-being? Retrieved August 1, 2007 from [http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-1999\\_05\\_01\\_RB\\_FatherContribute.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-1999_05_01_RB_FatherContribute.pdf)
- [15] Paquette, p. 193.
- [16] Ibid., 212.
- [17] Lewis & Lamb, 211.

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